

News in Brief

Nigeria sues Pfizer

The Nigerian Government has recently filed criminal and civil charges against Pfizer and is seeking \$7 billion in damages for the families who allegedly died or suffered disabilities after being given a drug developed by Pfizer during a meningitis epidemic. In 1996, an outbreak of meningitis swept across Nigeria, killing and deforming thousands. Families were urged to go to Kano's infectious diseases hospital for treatment. It was then that Pfizer was testing a new antibiotic Trovan (Trovaflaxacin) which was still unlicensed. Hundred children received Trovan as against 100 in the control group. In that epidemic about 200 children died and more developed permanent disabilities. This resulted in a public outcry against the trial and since then 4 separate legal actions including 31 criminal counts against 10 people have been filed in Nigerian courts. It may be no coincidence that this last case has been filed just a week after President Olusegun Obasanjo stepped down.

There have been more serious fallouts of this entire episode. The local people have developed such an antipathy to Western medicine that several states in Northern Nigeria refused to participate in a WHO mass polio immunization held some years ago. Local Islamic preachers said it was a plot to sterilize muslim women. This has been one of the causes of reemergence of polio in Nigeria. It has taken great efforts and tests to prove the safety of the vaccine.

Meanwhile Pfizer reiterated that the trial had been held with the full knowledge of the government and had been sound in all medical, scientific, regulatory and ethical standpoints. They have previously

said that verbal consent had been taken from the parents of the children before using Trovan. (BMJ 9 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6721771.stm>).

Goodbye to PLAB

Soon Indian doctors and nurses wishing to work in Britain may no longer need to take qualifying exams. The Health Care Joint Working Group of the UK-India Joint Economic Trade Committee (JETCO) recently reached a consensus that medical degrees from "reputed institutions must be recognized by each other on a case to case basis". The British Medical Council and the Medical Council of India had stopped recognizing each others medical degrees in 1975. The new agreement will be placed before the two governments for ratification.

If this is passed this means that immigrant doctors will no longer need to clear the PLAB (professional linguistic assessment board test) which costs £2500. Nor will nurses need to qualify exams to register with the Nurses and Midwife Council in the UK. Currently about 30% of the general practitioners in the UK's NHS (National Health Services) are Asians, mainly Indians and over 5000 doctors go to the UK every year.

India and UK as part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement are also working on relaxing movements of service professionals including health care staff. Slowly borders are blurring and geography is becoming history. (The Economic Times 13 June 2007).

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